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The Visitation of Dens.

AN APPEAL TO THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF 'WORK AMONG THE LOST.'

'So nigh to glory is our dust,
So nigh is God to man,
When Duty whispers low "Thou must,"
The soul replies, "I can."'

LONDON:
HATCHARDS, PICCADILLY.
1874.

THE VISITATION OF DENS.

My attention was first directed to the subject of the Visitation of Dens, by reading a private journal of Sarah Robinson's, the well-known worker among our soldiers.*

In 1864, Miss Robinson, being then in temporary charge of the Aldershot Military Mission Hall, was led to take an interest in the outcast women who form one of the hideous concomitants of standing armies. She began her work among them by the usual agency,—a midnight meeting,—of which in her private journal she gives the following account:—

* See a little shilling book called 'Active Service, or Work among our Soldiers,' (Hatchards) 8th Edition.

'We got the tea ready for ten o'clock; the two Bible women were to help me in the Hall, and Mr. Michael was to be in the streets to bring in any he could find and persuade to come. About thirty girls came. Nearly all were the worse for drink, and it took an hour's tea-drinking to get them sober and fit to listen. Whilst Mr. Michael was speaking to them they kept slipping out, on one pretence and another, till only a dozen remained; and one of these went into a fit and made a long interruption; and another also became faint and hysterical, and the Bible women were wholly occupied with smelling-salts and cold water. I found it quite hopeless to expect the girls to listen to what was being said, so tried to speak separately to a few. One girl greatly interested me; she is well educated and lady-like, the daughter of a ——shire magistrate. She had come in, not to tea, but entirely out of curiosity, to see if any lady really would notice such girls, as she had supposed Mr. Michael was joking when he spoke to her in the streets. I took her alone and talked to her just like a sister. She told me all her history;

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but though she seemed quite to love me for my interest in her, I could not get her to go into the Refuge; she said she should soon go mad, for she dared not let herself think. I spoke most earnestly to her of the end; she knew everything, but said it was too late, and all I could tell her of the love of Jesus and His power to save to the uttermost was of no use. The only thing that seemed to touch her was my caring for her; so I pressed that point, and begged her to let me be her friend, even if she continued as she was. She promised to meet me next day, Sunday, and go with me on my usual visit to the Refuge, and I promised no one should know who she was. When I shook hands with her at parting, she looked at me and thanked me with tears in her eyes. I talked with four others; altogether we hoped to gain seven girls from the evening meeting; they made appointments to see Mr. Michael and myself, and go with us to the Refuge. The next day not one made their appearance.'

In consequence of this apparent total failure of the midnight meeting, Miss Robinson was led to turn

her whole attention to morning and afternoon visitation of the dens where these poor creatures congregate. At that time they herded together in colonies, as many as a hundred inhabiting a row of small tenements, all communicating with one another internally, by means of passages, and named after the public-house which generally formed the corner house; a state of things which I am thankful to say no longer exists.

Miss Robinson thus describes in her journal her first attempt at penetrating into these dens. 'I was very foolish about going into the girls' rooms. I walked up and down praying for strength, and feeling wretchedly incapable and without self-control. Even the people in the low lodging-houses advised me not to venture, as I should certainly be insulted. At last I dashed into it, and found it really not so very difficult. Most of the girls were not up; nearly all, after their first surprise, received me kindly. One poor creature, Lizzie, I found in tears; she is ill, and fears she will die; I talked and prayed with her; she clung to me as if I could save her, and I promised to come

again. Nearly one hundred girls live in this 'Shamrock,' two in each room, chums as they are called, girls of all grades, some shockingly diseased. I then visited the infirmary to ask where the girls there came from, and so got directed to other dens, and spent most of the day in going amongst them. I could not write down, I cannot even bear to think of, the horrible things I saw and heard; but I only met with unkindness in one place, where the women who were ironing would have burnt me with a hot iron if I had stayed.'

With regard to the two modes of working,—midnight meetings and visitation of dens,—Miss Robinson says, 'I should alway prefer the morning work, when the drink is out of them, and their time is heavy on their hands. At night they are dressed up, half drunk, eager to be after their wretched gains; in the morning everything is real about them, no glitter, no illusion, no self-deception, no excitement, but real misery, pain, remorse, and the words you say are more likely to be felt as real too. I have no doubt much of what took place in the Hall last night, seems to the girls a dream

this morning. God helping me, I will work among them *by day* in future.'

And nobly was the resolve fulfilled. Once more to quote from her journal: 'When I look back on the work among these poor girls, it seems almost miraculous to me. Now I can go into any of the dens, and wherever they are herding, I have only to mention my name to bring them all round me; while I am talking to them, they seem to become softened and womanly again, quite different creatures. If I meet that horrid customary stare now, I know at once it is a new girl who does not know me. Such a number come in with every fresh regiment, the town is overflowing with them; and if there is a hell upon earth it is the streets of Aldershot of a night. No one can imagine it; they may think they can, but it is impossible. It is an infernal carnival. My watchword for May has been, "The precious blood of Christ"—just the word to take among our poor lost sisters. I have felt it so good that we cannot go beyond Christ's "uttermost," and I am very sure He would not have sent the message by me into these dens without

meaning something by it. Whether I see results or not, I am quite satisfied His word carried there will not be in vain. Lately I have become quite hardened physically to the work, and the joy I feel in it is quite divine; no other word can express it; it is in one sense entering into the joy of my Lord. As to the natural aptitude for this work, as far as I can see, it consists in straightforwardness and strength, as well as kindness. These poor things feel, when not excited with drink, so utterly forlorn and helpless that they want to lean on some one. I try to work on this, and get them to cast themselves on the Saviour.'

So many did Miss Robinson rescue, and such terrible cases, that at last she was actually requested to desist, as the Refuge could no longer bear the medical expenses, the Acts not being then in force.

After reading the above experience, I was so forcibly impressed that this was the right agency for reaching outcast women, that I naturally became exceedingly anxious to try if it could be set on foot in Brighton. Often and often I talked it over with Mrs. Vicars, the Lady Superintendent of the Albion

Hill Home; but as we were both of us invalids, no way seemed to open. At last, however, two clergymen's wives offered themselves for the work. At first I only met them for prayer. But soon finding myself stronger, as a thank-offering for returning health, I offered to go in the place of Mrs. S., who was confined to the house with a bad cold.

I shall never forget my first visit. We had prayed earnestly, even with tears, before going. After visiting one or two rooms together, my companion left me alone with four girls, while she went to find out another in the same house, whom she was seeking. 'That girl,' said one of them, pointing to a young thing of sixteen, 'is not one of us; she's only just come in.' At once I crossed over the room, sat down close by her, laid my hand on her shoulder, and pleaded with her as I think I never pleaded with a human being before, to come away with me *at once*, and let me save her from this horrible life. It was like dashing myself against a dead wall, for any impression my words seemed to make on any of the four. At last I exclaimed, 'Girls, I can't stand this. *I* can't touch your

hearts, but there's One who can. You must kneel down and pray with me.'

Rather to my surprise they all knelt down, and I prayed. Praying? It was more like shedding one's life-blood for them, in one's utter sense of helplessness to save from worse than death.

The door had not been closed two seconds behind me, as I left, when I heard shrieks of horrid laughter from all four, and fragments of indecent jests, which I in vain strove not to hear.

I went home literally bruised and bleeding. My prayer seemed to have gone no higher than the ceiling.

'O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?' Two days after, I heard that that young girl had come away the next day of her own accord, and gone straight up to the Home. She was motherless, and had gone astray for only a few weeks; she is now doing well, and will, I hope, be a happy, respectable little servant.

In three weeks between us we had rescued seven. One girl, whom we had never seen, came away simply

from hearing that ladies were visiting the dens, and thus realising that there were some Christian hearts who did not despise their lost sisters, but, like the good Samaritan, would even 'come where they were.' In another case, where den-visitation was tried, six were rescued in the same time.

But perhaps some will say that this number might have equally been rescued at a midnight meeting. What are the decided advantages of this plan, they will ask, to lead us to undertake such repulsive work?

In the first place, I think it is impossible to deny that this Christian visitation of dens by *women* in the daytime is a far better agency than midnight meetings, with addresses by *men*. Let it be clearly understood I am in no way opposed to midnight meetings. Where the evil is so vast, we cannot afford to reject or slight any agency for grappling with it. But in that which I suggest, supplemental, and in no way antagonistic to the other, there is no excitement, no publicity, and, I may add, when funds are so much needed for other branches of the work, no expense; and all may be reached instead of some. On one occasion one of these

poor outcasts exclaimed, bursting out into that horrid laughter, which is so emphatically not mirth, 'Get along with you, I don't want you. What good can you do me?' Suddenly she became quite grave, and said, 'No, I don't mean that. I *do* believe there's something in you ladies coming into such places as this after the likes of us. But these midnight meetings, there's so much excitement and preaching; and of course the men are all paid for it. But, now, with you ladies it is different; if anything *can* be done with us, it'll be by you ladies visiting us like this.'

But its immense advantages lie in the opportunities it gives for the rescue of young girls who may have been entrapped or led into sin by some careless, thoughtless step, the consequences of which they did not fully foresee. Take an exceedingly common case. A young servant girl—a mere child in years—stays out later than she intended, with some unsteady companion: she is afraid of returning to face her mistress, and is taken to a den for the night. Or take the still more common case of a girl who leaves her place from ill-health, too often brought on by over-work.

Often without a friend to turn to, in despair of earning a livelihood, in a fit of reckless despondency she takes to the only life which does not involve hard work for a bit of bread. And it is precisely these cases that are too much ashamed of themselves at first to make any effort to rescue themselves, and yet before they have grown hardened to their degraded life, shrink from it with disgust. Can a girl only be rescued before she has been more than a few days, or a few weeks, in sin, no evil habit has been formed, and the task of her reformation is comparatively easy, the difficulty increasing with the length of time she remains in degradation, not in an arithmetical, but a geometrical ratio.

Not only so, but the visitation of dens may be the means of that prevention, which is so emphatically better than cure. Take the following case which occurred only the other day. A young servant girl, owing to some dispute, was suddenly dismissed from her place, weak and ill from over-work. With that incredible carelessness of some mistresses, which at the last day will lay the sin of so many of these poor wanderers at their door, she was turned off without a thought

or a question as to what would become of her. She trailed herself wearily through several streets, seeking a respectable lodging in vain, and at last was directed, I am shocked to say by a policeman, to William Street. In perfect good faith she paid five shillings in advance for her lodging, only to discover, during the night, the nature of the house she had got into. She was too ill and too poor to seek another lodging, and could only lie still and pray that God would send her some friend. Falling into a troubled doze, she was awakened by the kind voice and touch of two ladies standing by her bedside. An angel of God could not have been more welcome and more unexpected. In ten minutes she was up and dressed, and being conveyed in a fly to a place of safety.

But now having proved its immense advantages, in what way is it to be done ?

In the first place, it can only be done by sheer hard praying. If you are content to go to this work in the ordinary prayerful frame of mind in which we go into our districts, you will be simply paralysed by the evil around you. This work has emphatically to be done

on the knees. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," saith the Lord. One must go emptied of oneself, in the strength of the Lord God, and Him only; you must pray, till you have got grace to be in earnest enough to plead with the first girl you meet, as if there were no other lost soul in the world but that one.

In the second place, no lady should go alone. I should suggest that a certain number of ladies combine together for the visitation of dens; that a list of such places be obtained from the parochial clergy, the police, or other sources; and that they be portioned out among the workers, a lady and a parochial mission woman going together, or two or three ladies going in company and dispersing into different rooms in the same house, as soon as they have got to know their work, so as not to hamper one another; and that they should meet before going forth for earnest united prayer.

Having fixed upon the house to be visited, do not knock at the front door any more than you would in visiting a public-house, but go boldly in and knock

at the door of one of the up-stair rooms.* In this way you will probably not meet the landlord or landlady. But if you do, oh do not pass them by as if there was no Saviour for them. Remember that somewhere, hidden away from all eyes but His, is a soul athirst even unto death, for the water of life, unhappy in its vileness, but never hearing a kind word; and boldly give the message of the Father's pardoning love. If neither Jew nor Mahommedan will even tread on a bit of paper, lest the name of God be written upon it, may we Christians never trample on a human soul, however

* With regard to the upper class of dens which possess a locked front door, and a servant to open it, and to which these directions do not therefore apply, we have as yet no experience. To find entrance into them does indeed require tact and care. I should suggest all the formalities of a regular call being observed; to dress in one's very best, and to send up one's card, having, if possible, obtained the name, but if not, asking for the lady of the house, and stating that one calls on business; and then having once got in, trusting to kindness, and tact, and simple human friendliness to gain one a footing. One has always some sense of loneliness resulting from the feeling of being looked down upon, to work upon. Anything like preaching would of course be out of the question; deep womanly compassions, the

vile, remembering that it was made in the image of God, and that Christ has written His own name on it in His own life-blood.

'But shall we not get insulted?' I think not. If the owner of the house be a man, look him quietly and firmly in the face; a man finds it very hard to insult a lady when she is looking straight at him: better still, ask him to direct you somewhere; it is marvellous how that touch of dependence and trust will disarm the worst. Whenever a man looks as if he was going to say something disagreeable, I

tender, human-hearted 'Christ in us,' that beauty of the Lord our God upon us which drew all classes of sinners to Him, must do the work here, speaking to them not as a class of sinners apart, but as those who, *like us*, have wandered from their Father, they in one way, we in another, as those who have tasted the nothingness of human love, and whose hearts want that 'place of rest imperturbable where love is not forsaken if itself forsaketh not,' who need, like us, a Saviour and a Friend. In cases where our visit excites anger, or is resented as an impertinent intrusion, a little gift of flowers the next day, accompanied with a kind note, might open the door again for further intercourse. What an untried field of labour lies open here to any one who would attempt it!

always walk straight up to him and ask him the way. If it be a woman, you run more risk; but either way ask them, quietly and gently: 'If you had a sister or a daughter in one of these houses, wouldn't you like a lady to come and be a friend to her? Well, then, these poor girls are some man's sister, some mother's child, don't grudge them a friend in me. You know I am not paid for coming; it's love that brings me into such places.' Some such appeal to their better feelings will often do wonders.

But let us boldly face the worst for a moment. Suppose we do get insulted. What then? Cannot God turn even that to our advantage? In the Crimean war a cannon-ball pierced the side of the hill where our troops were encamped, and without injuring any of our men, it shattered the rock and let out a secret spring, which for many months afforded our soldiers a supply of fresh, living water. And so, suppose that in the deadly fight with evil we are struck by cruel insult, it strikes not us only, but Him; and forthwith from the smitten Rock there gush forth streams of living tenderness: 'I, even I, am He that comforteth you:

who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die ?' 'Fear not, thou art mine, I will hold thee by thy right hand ;'—living streams that flow out, not only for us, but so often for the poor sinful soul who has injured us. Once it did happen to Mrs. Vicars to be most grievously insulted in one of these dens to which she had gone alone. Undaunted by the cruel pain it gave her, the brave heart went again two days after; she found the woman in an agony of repentance, and not only was her own heart opened, but she thankfully allowed Mrs. Vicars to take her own daughter and one of her lodgers to a Penitentiary.

On gaining access to a den, our whole efforts must be directed to getting any girl who may be impressed to come away with us at once. 'Some save with fear, pulling them out of the fire.' Suffer her to delay, make an appointment with her the next day, and in most cases you have lost her. Those engaged in this work would do well to know of two or three respectable and, if possible, Christian women, without children, who would take the care of a girl till a place in a bright, well-managed Penitentiary can be found for

her. And here I would give a word of most earnest caution. It may be that you will have to work for weeks and see no fruit. But it may be that you will rescue such large numbers that it will be a sore difficulty and perplexity to know what to do with them. Do not, I beseech you, yield to what will then be a strong temptation, to send them out at once into service. I know there are some who act on this system, and state that the results are satisfactory. But I contend that the evil that must result is of such a secret kind as not easily to be detected. The first thing an unreclaimed woman will do is to corrupt the minds of the boys of the family, if there are any. I do not speak from conjecture, but from fact. In another case that I know of, a woman whose past history it is a shame even to think of, has been introduced as a nursery governess into a private family without the unfortunate mother knowing the circumstances of her past life. Now I say, better a thousand times that this fearful social disease should be localised in certain spots, which we call dens, than that by our hasty and injudicious benevolence it should be struck

inward into the very bosom of our families. I believe that the true principle is to recognise, with Mrs. Vicars, that these girls have sinned, and to exact some proof of repentance, some penalty, such as going for a time to a penitentiary, which will mark the distinction between a girl who has gone astray, and another who has resisted the same temptations, remembering that justice is ever the back-bone of mercy. In cases where the objection to enter a penitentiary is insuperable, it might be possible to try to gain the girl entrance into a respectable work-shop or factory, placing her in some way under Christian supervision; but I should consider it rather a forlorn hope as to her reclamation, though better than leaving her in a den.

My own hope and belief is, that out of the visitation of dens, if systematically carried out, the gradual formation of Cottage Homes will arise, which will greatly facilitate the work of reformation.*

I do not know whether I need notice that con-

* See 'Work among the Lost,' with Appendix, 1*s.* 6*d.* Fifth thousand. Hatchards.

temptible argument which is so often brought against all efforts of this kind, that in rescuing one you only make room for another. The same argument applies equally to reclaiming a young thief. There is no fixed number of these dens that must be kept constantly filled; any house may turn into a den, and turn back into a respectable house; the immorality of a town can be just as much lessened as its intemperance. Let us remember that temptation does not come only from men, as is sometimes supposed, but that these poor lost creatures, with whomsoever the blame of their first dragging down may rest, are the worst seducers to sin, and that in this case lessening the supply must lessen the demand, and diminish prevailing immorality.

And now having shown that a lady can do this work, and grapple with the evil in the worst and most intensified form in which it has ever existed in England—the Aldershot dens—and that therefore it must be possible for Christian women to undertake it in the milder form in which it exists in our large towns, I would ask my sisters in Christ one solemn

heart-searching question. Have we not been faithless and disloyal to our Master in adopting the code we have, that these dens are to be passed over as a matter of course, and never entered, even when they are in our own districts? Is not the very essence of Christianity just this, that the kingdom of God *is* come, and that now every spot of God's earth can, and ought to be claimed for Him and His Christ? And whatever code we may adopt, are not the solemn words out against us, 'If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold we knew it not; doth not He that pondereth the heart consider it? And He that keepeth thy soul, doth He not know it? And shall not He render to every man according to His works?'

It is computed that in London alone there are many thousands of these outcasts from God and man, and yet we Christian women can stand like the fair white marble idols of old. Feet have we, but they cannot hasten to the rescue — eyes have we, but they are

stone blind to our lost sisters' misery and degradation —hands have we, but they cannot deliver those who in all fearful senses are 'drawn unto death.' Do not tell me it needs a remarkable woman, it needs peculiar gifts to do this work. It seems to me we talk so much about gifts now-a-days that we have forgotten that one gift that cometh down from the Father of lights, who giveth liberally, the gift of simple soul-saving earnestness, which 'can do all things through Christ strengthening,' the only gift I ever hear St. Paul speak about when a lost soul is to be saved. With simple womanly kindness, and the strength that comes from faith in Christ, many women after thirty, married or unmarried, can do this work. If Miss Robinson is a remarkable woman, *we* are not remarkable women. God has helped us to do it; He will help you.

God knows I do not want to make light of the anguish of this work. He only can know what it costs a pure-minded woman to undertake it. But, my sisters, our Christ stands in our midst, and shows us

His feet and His hands with suppliant palms that bear the wounds of His love, dumb mouths that surely plead with us for love and loyalty unto death. Dare we show Him in return unwounded hands and feet—feet that have refused to be pierced in treading sharp and difficult paths of duty; hands that have refused to be wounded in saving those, for whom He was content to be wounded unto death? Must I not repeat the words of Bishop Selwyn, uttered before the University: 'If, as soldiers of the Cross, we stick at anything, we are disgraced for ever;' he paused, and then repeated in an emphatic voice, '*we are disgraced for ever.*'

The evil is enormous, crushing. But at least let it be said of you and me, 'She has done what she could.' Let there be no longer in our large towns a certain number of spots abandoned to the devil, the threshold of which *no Christian foot ever crosses*, and where large numbers of girls are practically imprisoned from the want of moral courage to effect their own escape. And when our Lord asks us, 'Where is

ıy sister?' let us no longer have to say, 'I know ot;' but even from the dens of our great cities may e be able to answer, 'Here, Lord, and I am with er, striving in Thy strength to be her keeper and reserver.'

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